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Chairman Schiff Releases Opening Statement for Open Hearing With Former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine

Marie Yovanovitch

Washington, November 15, 2019

Washington, DC — Today, Chairman Adam Schiff released his opening statement for the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence's open hearing with Former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch as part of the impeachment inquiry into President Donald J. Trump.

Full statement below as prepared:

In April 2019 the United States Ambassador to Ukraine, Marie Yovanovitch – was in Kyiv when she was called by a senior State Department official and told to get on the next plane back to Washington. Upon her return to DC, she was informed by her superiors that although she had done nothing wrong, she could no longer serve as Ambassador to Ukraine because she did not have the confidence of the President.

It was a stunning turn of events for this highly regarded career diplomat, who had been doing such a remarkable job fighting corruption in Ukraine that a short time earlier she had been asked by the State Department to extend her tour.

Ambassador Yovanovitch has been in the Foreign Service for 33 years and served much of that time in the former Soviet Union. Her parents had fled Stalin and later Hitler before settling in the United States. She is an exemplary officer, who is widely praised and respected by her colleagues. She is known as an anti-corruption champion whose tour in Kyiv was viewed as very successful.

Ambassador Michael McKinley, who has served with her in the Foreign Service for several decades, stated that from the earliest days of her career in the Foreign Service, she was "excellent, serious, committed. I certainly remember her being one of those people who seemed to be destined for greater things."

Her successor as acting Chief of Mission in Ukraine, Ambassador Bill Taylor, described her as “very frank, she was very direct. She made points very clearly, and she was indeed tough on corruption, and she named names and that sometimes is controversial out there, but she’s a strong person and made those charges.”

In her time in Kyiv, Ambassador Yovanovitch was tough on corruption, too tough on corruption for some, and her principled stance made her enemies. As George Kent told this committee on Wednesday, “you can’t promote principled anti-corruption action without pissing-off corrupt people.”

And Ambassador Yovanovitch did not just “piss off” corrupt Ukrainians, like the corrupt former prosecutor general Yuri Lutsenko, but also certain Americans like Rudy Giuliani, Donald Trump’s personal attorney, and two individuals, now indicted, who worked with him, Igor Fruman and Lev Parnas. Lutsenko, Giuliani, Fruman, Parnas and others who would come to include the president’s own son, Don Jr., promoted a smear campaign against her based on false allegations. At the State Department there was an effort to push back, to obtain a statement of support from Secretary Pompeo, but those efforts failed, when it became clear that President Trump wanted her gone.

Some have argued, that a president has the ability to nominate or remove any ambassador he wants, that they serve at the pleasure of the president. And that is true. The question before us is not whether Donald Trump could recall an American ambassador with a stellar reputation for fighting corruption in Ukraine, but why would he want to? Why did Rudy Giuliani want her gone, and why did Donald Trump? And why would Donald Trump instruct the new team he put in place, the three Amigos – Gordon Sondland, Rick Perry and Kurt Volker -- to work with the same man, Rudy Giuliani, who played such a central role in the smear campaign against her?

Rudy Giuliani has made no secret of his desire to get Ukraine to open investigations into the Bidens, as well as a conspiracy theory of Ukrainian interference in our 2016 election. As he said in one interview in May 2019, "We're not meddling in an election; we're meddling in an investigation, which we have a right to do." More recently, he told CNN's Chris Cuomo "Of course I did!" when asked if he had pressed Ukraine to investigate Joe Biden. And he has never been shy about who he is doing this work for – his client, the president.

One powerful ally Giuliani had in Ukraine to promote these political investigations was Lutsenko, the

corrupt former prosecutor general. And one powerful adversary Lutsenko had was a certain U.S. Ambassador named Marie Yovanovitch. It is no coincidence that in the now infamous July 25th call with Zelensky, Donald Trump brings up a corrupt Ukrainian prosecutor and praises him. Against all evidence, Trump claims that this former prosecutor general was “very good” and “he was shut down and that’s really unfair.” But the woman known for fighting corruption, his own former Ambassador, the woman ruthlessly smeared and driven from her post, the president does nothing but disparage. Or worse, threaten. “Well, she’s going to go through some things,” the President declares. That tells you a lot about the President’s priorities and intentions.

Getting rid of Ambassador Yovanovitch helped set stage for an irregular channel that could pursue the two investigations that mattered so much to the President, the 2016 conspiracy theory, and most important, an investigation into the 2020 political opponent he apparently feared most, Joe Biden. And the President's scheme might have worked but for the fact that the man who would succeed Ambassador Yovanovitch, whom we heard from on Wednesday, acting Ambassador Taylor, would eventually discover the effort to press Ukraine into conducting these investigations and would push back hard, but for the fact that someone blew the whistle.

Ambassador Yovanovitch was serving our nation's interest in fighting corruption in Ukraine, but she was considered an obstacle to the furtherance of the President's personal and political agenda. For that she was smeared and cast aside. The powers of the presidency are immense, but they are not absolute and cannot be used for a corrupt purpose. The American people expect their President to use the authority they grant him in the service of the nation, not to destroy others to advance his personal or political interests.

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